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Towards preventing a biological weapons technology race.

Biological weaponry poses a serious threat to all people, not just the combatants. As an overhanging anxiety it also contaminates other efforts at world order.

The BW convention, signed 1972, was a useful partial step towards controlling biological and toxin weapons, notwithstanding its well-understood limitations with respect to a) verification, b) enforcement, and c) its inability to deal with weapons-related R & D (as opposed to production and deployment). Intrinsic to its utility was an expectation that it would foster a climate of mutually advantageous, cooperative verification and enforcement, meeting the deeper interests of all sides.

The convention has undoubtedly been helpful in forestalling a major technology race in BW, compared e.g. to recent history in cruise missiles. However, the limitations of the convention perhaps now contribute to other elements of international competition. The result today is a high degree of unmitigated suspicion about actions and intentions of 'the other sides', with grave consequences for 1) the credibility of arms control agreements generally - especially those not manifestly verifiable by the grossest of national means; and 2) the potentiality for fueling a major technology race between the superpowers, within the letter if not the spirit of the 1972 BW convention. Since biological agents could be manufactured in plants primarily designed for medical or industrial purposes, and since we have the prospect of still newer and more effective weapons-agents from biotechnology, anxieties about a threatening 'breakout' in violation of the 1972 convention further poison international harmony.

Meanwhile, international security is more likely to be threatened by the proliferation of BW capability to less responsible powers; the nuclear superpowers have a marginal need, at most, for BW atop their nuclear retaliatory capability. The possibility of regulating that proliferation is gravely impaired by the current lack of cooperation in the enforcement of the BW convention. The irresponsibility just mentioned is aggravated by the likelihood that biological weapons will spread infection from the targets under attack, with potentially unlimited collateral damage, even retroaction.

It will not be easy to design formal procedures for a more cooperative approach: the minimum that should be sought promptly is to enhance forums for candid discussion where questions can be raised and pressed on matters that are eliciting anxieties about compliance with the purposes of the BW convention. The still unanswered questions about the "Sverdlovsk case" are an example. The "answers" offered in print about the

"foodborne epidemic of intestinal anthrax" at Sverdlovsk were so lacking in detail, they did not meet the minimum standards of a scientific or public health report.

In the long run, mutual confidence about the intentions and capabilities of BW-related research can be built up by more extensive international cooperation in the study of infectious disease. All responsible states will also have to be proactive in their reassurances to other states about their posture on BW and compliance with the spirit of the BW disarmament convention. The fabric of international control of BW development is tenuous indeed.

Within the framework of the bilateral US-USSR Academies of Science - CISAC discussions, we are just organizing subgroups of specialists to address the above challenges.